

COMMUNITY READING PROJECT

Discussion Questions for
Isabel Wilkerson's
The Warmth of Other Suns

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Part One: In the Land of the Forefathers

1. What was the Great Migration? How did this migration impact the South? The North?
2. Why do you think that, “a comprehensive treatment of the century-long story of black migration does not exist”? What do you hope to learn as you read about this rarely discussed chapter in American history?
3. Discuss why Isabel Wilkerson is writing this book and analyze the choices she makes as an author to follow three distinct narratives.
4. Why do you think that, “Over time, the story of the Great Migration has suffered distortions that have miscast an entire population” (14)? What distortions do you expect her to challenge?
5. How is the following statement important in our understanding the book? “The actions of the people in this book were both universal and distinctly American” (14).

Part Two: Beginnings

1. Describe Ida Mae Brandon Gladney. What was her childhood like, growing up in Mississippi? Give a brief description of her life in 1996.
2. “What few people seemed to realize or perhaps dared admit was that the thick walls of the caste system kept everyone in prison” (33). How so? Compare the examples in the book with your own observations today.
3. What factors led to the scapegoating and violent lynching of blacks in the post-civil war era? Discuss the impact of Jim Crow laws on black citizens.
4. How did prominent black leaders feel about the migration in the early days?
5. Describe the courtship of Ida Mae and George Gladney
6. Describe George Swanson Starling. What was his childhood like, growing up in Florida? Give a brief description of his life in 1996.
7. What systems ensured that sharecroppers would rarely receive a fair settlement?
8. How did the Neal lynching typify Florida’s “position as the southernmost state with among the most heinous acts of terrorism committed anywhere in the south” (62)?

9. How did George learn the rules of the caste system? Why is this important? (62)
10. Describe the courtship of George and Inez.
11. Describe Robert Joseph Pershing Foster. What has his childhood like, growing up in Louisiana? Give a brief description of his life in 1996.
12. Discuss the disparities between white and black schooling systems experienced by Robert and his family.
13. “[...] Ida Mae and George and Pershing and children all over the South were growing up, trying to comprehend the caste they were born into, adjusting or resisting, lying in bed at night and imagining a world that was different and free, and knowing it was out there because they had seen it in the casual airs, the haughtiness even, and the clothes and the stories of the people from the North” (90). Discuss the different ways in which the “seeds” for the Great Migration were planted (89-122).
14. Describe the courtship of Robert and Alice.

***A Thin Light Far Away* – GROUP ONE (123)**

Discuss the book's title and the reference to the Hubble discovery. Analyze how Wilkerson uses metaphor to carry the migration meta-narrative.

***The Awakening* – GROUP ONE (124-164)**

1. How does wartime impact all of our characters? Discuss each person's individual reasons for leaving the South for good.
2. George Swanson Starling. How does George's time in Detroit impact his worldview once he returns to Florida? What is debt peonage? Why did George finally leave Florida?
3. Robert Joseph Pershing Foster. How does Jim Crow follow Pershing into the Army? Why did he decide upon California after leaving the military?
4. Ida Mae Brandon Gladney. How is Joe Lee critical in determining Ida Mae's fate?
5. The single largest factor that set off the Great Migration was the WWI Labor Crisis. What was the South's initial response to the flood of workers leaving? After the panic sets in, what tactics were created to intercept departing black workers? Did they work? Why or why not?

***Breaking Away* – GROUP ONE (164-179)**

1. Why were planters shocked when their trusted sharecroppers expressed a desire to leave?
2. Discuss the statement, “Still it made no sense to Pershing that one set of people could be in a cage, and the people outside couldn't see the bars” (174). How does privilege operate in this way? Examine your own perspectives from either side of the cage, depending on various circumstances such as class, race, religion, ethnicity, and sexuality.
3. How is the length of migration patterns significant to our understanding of the Great Migration?

Part Three: Exodus – GROUP TWO (180-221)

1. Discuss the hopes and fears of our characters as they each depart.
2. This book is full of hard facts surrounding the Great Migration. Which ones stand out to you? Why? How are these facts significant to our understanding the Great Migration? Our characters?
3. Wilkerson points out many times in this book that participants in the Great Migration were unaware of the “movement” underfoot and viewed their relocation as an individual act. Why is this important?
4. What challenges did the actual “exodus” present to our characters? What difficulties were routinely encountered by those leaving?
5. Discuss the importance of the border towns. What unique challenges did they present to travelers?

Part Four: The Kinder Mistress – GROUP THREE (222-259)

1. Discuss the new experiences and unexpected challenges migrants from the South faced as they looked for

- work in their new homes of Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. How did the reality of these cities compare with the hopes of the migrants fleeing to them?
2. What did the migrants bring with them? What was left behind?
 3. Why did the Harlem covenants finally fall apart? How does understanding the history of Harlem help us understand the city that George moves into?
 4. Why was it difficult for Robert to make inroads into the black population to start his practice? How did he eventually make a name for himself?

Divisions – GROUP THREE (260-284)

1. How did sociologists and economists characterize the migrants at that time? How were their assumptions wrong? Craft a statement that accurately characterizes the migrants after reading this book. Consider how this narrative could have shifted living conditions for those who participated in the Great Migration.
2. Compare current narratives in place for people who are looking for a better life somewhere else through the act of migration. What information would you need in order to assess if the portrayal of these migrants is accurate?
3. How does the story of Jesse Owens connect to this section of the book?
4. Why were black families overcharged by landlords? How is this significant to the future of black neighborhoods?
5. Wilkerson challenges another modern-day assumption in this book concerning race riots in this chapter. What is the assumption? Are you compelled to agree with her assessment? Why or why not?
6. Analyze Chicago's response to the racial divisions tearing the city apart. What was the impact of the report, *The Negro in Chicago*? What could have been done differently? Again, can you apply the lessons learned here to current immigration issues?
7. How were George and Robert struggling to make ends meet?

To Bend in Strange Winds – GROUP FOUR (285-332)

1. What were some of the spoken and unspoken rules that new migrants needed to navigate as they arrived? Why were the old-timers especially tough on them?
2. How did the migrants try to move up the social ladder? What entrepreneurial tactics did they employ to earn extra income?
3. How was the 1940 Presidential election significant for many migrants? How was it significant for the country as a whole?
4. What is "hoboing"? How did George treat the hobos he encountered?
5. Discuss Robert's longing for white Cadillac cars and vacations to Las Vegas. Analyze what role materialism plays in your own understanding of the "American Dream" and/or moving up in terms of social status. Analyze the extra barriers in place concerning upward mobility when considering race--then and now.
6. Discuss the following quote, "Overall, however, what was becoming clear was that , north or south, wherever colored labor was introduced, a rivalrous sense of unease and insecurity washed over the working-class people who were already there, an unease that was economically not without merit but rose to near hysteria when race and xenophobia were added to preexisting fears" (317).
7. Who was Harry T. Moore?

Complications, The River Keeps Running, The Prodigals – GROUP FOUR (333-370)

1. Discuss the perils of working as a domestic in the North. How would Ida Mae's story be different if it took place in the South?
2. Despite the fact that there were no colored or white signs in New York and other Northern cities, what were the many ways that segregation was still enforced?
3. Who was Robert's most famous patient?
4. Which responses resonated with you the most from the Chicago Commission on Race Relations survey (349)? Why?
5. Why was Arrington High committed to an insane asylum in 1957? How did he escape? How is his story similar to Henry Brown's?
6. Discuss the troubles that plague George and Inez.

7. How did the song, “Hide Nor Hair” impact George’s practice?
8. Describe the relationship between the migrants and their former homes in the South. Who returned to visit? Why? Who refused? Why?
9. Who was the “most memorialized black northerner ever to go south”? What happened to him?

Disillusionment, Revolutions – GROUP FIVE (371-412)

1. What was the Cicero riot? What was the legacy of this historical event?
2. What is the relationship between property values and integration? How did these territorial struggles mirror the struggles taking place in the South?
3. What tragedy befalls Robert that will forever change this life?
4. What does sociologist Gunnar Myrdal mean by the term, “Northern Paradox”? How does this connect to MLK’s visit to Chicago in 1966?
5. How does the civil rights era impact George personally? How does it impact his job on the railroad?
6. How did George ensure that passengers were informed of their rights?
7. Discuss how “hypersegregation” took place in different neighborhoods across Chicago? Why was Hyde Park a rare island of integration? Discuss your own experiences with racial segregation. What other aspects of our lives are segregated today?
8. How were Rufus Clement and Robert Foster at “opposite ends of the Great Migration”?
9. Discuss how MLK’s assassination impacts George, Ida Mae, Robert, and countless other migrants around the country. What significant Act is passed precisely one week after King’s death?

The Fullness of the Migration – GROUP FIVE (413-431)

1. How is 1970 a significant year?
2. Why does Wilkerson point out that, “Many years later, people would forget about the quiet successes of everyday people like Ida Mae” (415)?
3. Why were black migrants at a distinct disadvantage compared to the European immigrants? What tactics of assimilation were available to European immigrants that gave them an advantage? How did black migrants compensate for the disadvantages?
4. Discuss the significance of George’s statement within the context of the book, “Maybe you have to live through the worst of times to recognize the best of times when they came to you” (420).
5. How did you feel while reading about Robert’s party? What was he seeking? Did he find it? Will he ever find it?

Part Five: Aftermath & Epilogue – GROUP SIX (432-end)

1. Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka declared segregated schools inherently unequal and therefore unconstitutional in 1954. Discuss the impact of this ruling on the South and in Chickasaw County more specifically. What was the impact in Lake County, Florida?
2. What single event characterizes Robert’s later return to Monroe? What changed? What remained the same? How does the death of Alice impact Robert?
3. Why were the Great Migration parents particularly unable to shield their kids from the perils of city life? Why aren’t the children always able to build upon their parents’ dreams of equality and prosperity?
4. How did Robert Pershing Foster end his career in medicine? Is he ultimately happy with the choices he made? What about the other migrants?
5. What stands out to you while reading George’s return trips to Eustis? What factors does he wrestle with as other migrants return to the South to retire?
6. “Were the people who left the South—and their families—better off for having done so? Was the loss of what they left behind worth what confronted them in the anonymous cities they fled to?” (528)
7. Discuss the legacies of these three migrants. What did they leave behind?
8. Why did Wilkerson write this book? Who should read it? Why?